

STEPHEN KING INTERVIEWED

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From the Interstellar Escapades of **STAR WARS & EMPIRE** To the Classic Mythos and Drama of **DARK CRYSTAL & BEYOND**

Producer GARY KURTZ Talks About The Past, Present and Future of SF Cinema

Interview by MICHAEL STEIN Reported by JESSIE HORSTING

Science fiction conventions are very singular gatherings. They bear little resemblance to a hotel full of hardware wholesalers or an assemblage of the Loyal Order of Moose. True, they are a gathering of many people with a common interest but the atmosphere is anything but business—it is purely a celebration of the fantastic. And this year's World Science Fiction Convention held in Chicago had much to celebrate—the movie offerings of 1981 read like a list of Who's Who in science fiction and fantasy cinema: Raiders of the Lost Ark, Dragonslayer, Time Bandits, Outland . . . And this year's convention took place after the mid-summer release of Star Trek II, Poltergeist, E.T. and Blade Runner. In unpreceded fashion, both 1981 and 1982 have been a feast of outstanding films in what has been for the last few years, a wasteland of rip-off and clichéd "B" movies, trying to capitalize upon the success of ground breakers such as Star Wars and *CE3K*.

But the people of the various film communities responsible for these

films are now more-than-ever aware of the value of strong fan interest and word of mouth popularity. And the studios are making more positive efforts to promote that interest.

On hand at Chi Con IV was producer Gary Kurtz, the man who along with George Lucas, brought you American Graffiti, Star Wars, The Empire Strikes Back and many other films. He was attending, in part, to preview the release of his new fantasy feature, *Dark Crystal*. Kurtz is co-producer of the feature along with *Muppets* creator, Jim Henson. However, Gary Kurtz had much to share about past and future projects as well.

At conventions, presentations are often given in the form of an open interview that all are invited to attend. *Fantastic Films* editor, Michael Stein was asked to conduct such an interview with Mr. Kurtz and the following is what this mild-mannered but well-spoken producer had to say about his profession: the business of making movies.

The two Star Wars movies to date continue to be an astoundingly successful phenomena of movie making and marketing. During the interview Kurtz offered a few insights into the difficulty of getting this "phenomena" off the ground. We also asked if his interest in science fiction films was just "good business" or if he, like us, shared a genuine interest in the genre.

KURTZ: Well, it's good business now but when we started with *Star Wars*, it didn't appear to be good business—no one seemed to want to do it. My interest however, has been long-standing: I've always been a fan. I think that science fiction and fantasy are among the best genre to work in for film because they are very visual, and cinema is ideal for trying to deal with some of the fantastic aspects of worlds that we can't see in everyday life. I know a lot of the fans have always questioned why some of the more famous and serious of the science fiction writings have never been turned into film. I think it's just a matter of everyone being nervous about them, and of course, some are not possible to translate to film.

"Each art form has its own strength and weaknesses and if you try arbitrarily to transfer material from one form to another it

**"Making a Film is Like
A Chemistry Experiment:
You Dump in All the
Various Ingredients,
You Stir It Up, and You
Stand Back and Hope..."**

doesn't always work out. I'm sure that you all have favourite "bad" science fiction films that have been made from good work. Those filmmakers didn't start out to make bad films; they wanted to make something they thought would be fulfilling to that particular story, but it didn't work out. Making a film is like a chemistry experiment: you dump in all the various ingredients, you stir it up and stand back and hope. Sometimes it turns out perfect and other times it doesn't turn out at all. You're never completely sure. But other people can always tell you why it didn't work afterwards.

"Science fiction and fantasy is not always popular in film and in a time when people are very reluc-

tant to experiment with new forms it's even more difficult to convince them that it is a genre that should be exploited a little more in terms of making good cinema out of very good source material.

"It's always been an uphill battle—especially with *Star Wars*. Everyone felt that 2001 had not been really successful and it was five or six years before it broke even, although it eventually made money. People in the industry assumed that was representative of the audience for science fiction films. I think, however, that if the film is good enough, it doesn't matter what the genre. I know Steven Spielberg was told that *E.T.* was "a childrens' film" and that no one else would want to see it. And if you

read only the screenplay you can see how someone could make that interpretation. That kind of thing goes on all the time, with almost every film that has been very popular down through the history of movies. At some time, someone has declined to make it.

"As far as popular entertainment goes, films are the most expensive medium we have and because each film has to generate a large enough audience to get the investment back, studios are very reluctant to take chances."

*Kurtz paused at this point and Mike took the opportunity to ask him if he had any indications, before the release of *Star Wars*, that it was destined to be a groundbreaking film; that it's audience would be massive and worldwide?*

KURTZ: When you start a film, you have to have faith that it will generate an audience large enough to recoup your investment. George (Lucas) for a long time had wanted to make a space fantasy, a 'space opera' type adventure series in the tradition of *Buck Rodgers* and *Flash Gordon*. We realized there hadn't been a science fiction story of this type for a long time. Most of the science fiction films that had been out since 2001—probably since *Forbidden Planet* in 1955, ac-

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GARY KURTZ

(Continued from page 23)

tually, had all been very depressing stories about problems in the future. Some of the stories on paper had worked very well, the authors were very good at pointing out current sociological problems by projecting them into the future, having us try to analyse them in another context. However, on film a lot of the stories turned out to be uninteresting and sometimes the major points got lost in the translation. In any case, we felt there was a whole new generation of kids that had not seen a good science fiction/fantasy film. We assumed that because *Star Wars* was the type of film that we wanted to see, there would be enough of an audience out there that we would at least get our money back. So we used *2001* as a guideline anticipating that if the people who went to see *2001* came to see *Star Wars*, there would be enough box office to break even. That was the gamble, basically.

"But some of the major studios didn't feel it was worth the gamble at that time. If I'd been the head of a studio, I'm not even sure I would have taken that gamble. If you look at the script for *Star Wars*, it reads difficult—the special effects and other things are not well explained in the script—and a lot of the studio special effects departments had closed down. We'd gone through an era of very few special effects of any kind—few miniatures, few mattes—many people who were experts in that field had retired or died or gotten out of the business. We knew we'd have to hire new people so we went outside the business—to find people who were working in other areas, architectural model builders, photographic technicians working on commercials and industrial films. We put together a team that said they could do it. Our approach to special effects was going to be: if you could make a paper spaceship and throw it against a black velvet background and it would work then that's what we would do, as long as the shots looked good—in fact there were a couple of shots like that . . . unfortunately, most of them were more expensive than that . . .

"The idea was not build up a revenue of technology, it was getting the shots to look good. There were several shots in *Star Wars* where we worked for many months and did several takes and the shots were still only marginally acceptable. In the context of the film you might not notice them but we are always aware of them. There were other shots that went well the first time. There's no way you can tell in advance, you just have to allow the time to do them.

"One of the other problems with *Star Wars* was in initially trying to convince the studio that there were science fiction fans. It was a long up hill battle but no different then trying to get any film made except that after it was popular it was much easier to sell science fiction projects.

"You saw many other films that were 'just like' *Star Wars*. Somehow, people figured the formula was to have robots and fast flying spaceships. I think it's much better if each film had an original idea, but unfortunately, it's much easier to sell an idea 'like' something else.

"There's a story about MGM. They'd just come out with a film, in the thirty's that had been made entirely on location, quite an accomplishment at the time. It was called *Trader Horn*. They took truckloads of equipment all over Africa and shot live sound with the actors and the animals and so forth. After it was completed it became a very popular film. The story goes that the studio heads were saying, 'Trader Horn is very popular—we

with the director, it can be a very creative partnership—mine always have been.

"I suppose, technically, the major job of the producer is to put together all the elements of a motion picture—bringing together the writers, the director, all the technical crew and make everything happen.

"On the practical level, the director needs to be responsible for the actors on the set every day and can't be troubled by the other problems that are happening behind the scenes—that is the producer's responsibility: to take hold of those problems and make sure the director has all the tools he needs to work with every day. He shepards a picture through completion and is

days, called *Planet of Blood* with John Saxon, Dennis Hopper, Florence Marley and a lot of other people. It was a Russian science fiction film that Roger had bought the rights to. There was nothing in the Russian film of any consequence except some great special effects shots, great spaceship shots, taking off and landing and flying around. We used all that together with some long shots of the actors in spacesuits walking around a planet, and shot our own story about a vampire from outer space.

"Basil Rathbone was in that too, it was one of his last pictures. One of my greatest joys was working one day with Basil Rathbone, having lunch with him and listening to his great stories about the old days in Hollywood. Actually, for what amounted to about \$60,000 we had a 78 or 82 minute film that, although some of the acting was a bit embarrassing and the sets were a little cardboard, didn't turn out too bad. Forrest Ackerman was in that too—he does a walk-on at the end of the movie as one of the scientists who collects the vampire's eggs.

"That kind of film was, in some ways, more fun to do than a big, expensive picture because it's like being a film student again—having a half a dozen people do everything. That is my background. On almost all the films I've produced, I've directed part of them—directed part of the second unit on all of them, edited part and photographed part of all of them. I enjoy doing that and would like to continue although my current job responsibilities are such that they don't allow me much time for that any more."

DARK CRYSTAL

Although Gary Kurtz has enjoyed tremendous success in his association with George Lucas, he has opted to move in other directions with upcoming projects. His collaboration with Jim Henson has resulted in a very ambitious film, Dark Crystal, a mysterious and surreal tale of fantasy creatures and their world of myth and magic. When asked how he had become involved in this new project he explained the origins and concepts of the film.

KURTZ: *Dark Crystal* grew out of *The Empire Strikes Back*. During the preparation for *Empire*, I went to see Jim Henson about some assistance for a creature we were developing . . . that creature, of course, was Yoda. Jim had been working for many years on an idea for an all fantasy adventure using all mechanical creatures. Because Yoda was along the idea of this work, he thought it would be a good experiment. He offered a tremendous amount of assistance: Frank Oz and other members of Henson's staff actually did the performing of Yoda and they offered their



Fantastic Films Editor Michael Stein interviews Producer Gary Kurtz at ChiCon IV.

"One of the problems with STAR WARS was trying to convince the studios that there were science fiction fans . . ."

have to come up with something really original, completely different in all respects, but what are we going to call it? *Trader* what?"

ON MAKING MOVIES

In filmmaking and in reporting on filmmaking, a great deal of attention is focused on the directors of favorite films, the actors that portray the characters and on the writers that provide the intricacies of plot. Generally, the public has a reasonable conception of what is involved in those activities. The responsibilities of the producer have always remained somewhat mysterious. We know he's important, after all, his name always comes first in the credits. (But what the heck does he do?) We put this question to Mr. Kurtz and his answer makes you realize why the producers get top billing.

KURTZ: Well, a producer has to do everything, really. Depending on the project and your relationship

the liaison with the studio and the distributing organization, and supervises the marketing and advertising. Some studios allow a lot more input than others—we have been trying to increase participation in the marketing of a picture. Now it is much easier than it was ten or twelve years ago, when filmmakers generally were told, 'O.K., you've done your job, now go away.' I think it's much better if the filmmaker can participate in the marketing and advertising, and that's one of the key jobs of the producer, if his relationship with the studio is good. Otherwise, the producer's job is a little difficult to pinpoint. My background as a filmmaker has included all phases really: I've photographed a lot of low budget films, I was a film editor, a make-up artist, a special effects person, optical printer operator . . . I did everything.

"Once, some years back, I was production supervisor and assistant director on a film we did for Roger Corman, that we shot in four

expertise to Stuart Freeborn who was the makeup and creature supervisor for the development of *Yoda*. That technology went back into *Dark Crystal*. They had been working on several creatures for a long time and from that point, more serious work began. Jim had told me about *Dark Crystal* and it seemed very intriguing. Fantasy films have been a favorite genre of mine for a long time. We decided we could work together and he asked me to join the project. I think it will be a very unusual film and I've had a lot of fun working on it."

The designer for the mystical world of Jim Henson and Gary Kurtz was Brian Froud, who became well-known with the publication of his illustrated anthologies Gnomes, and Faeries, Froud's personal fairytale. Froud had two important admirers and his concepts have been meticulously recreated in Dark Crystal. We asked Kurtz if he could explain the scope of those concepts.

KURTZ: Any Fantasy Film has to be designed from the ground up. That's one of the nice things about it: you get a chance to look and say, 'what would this world be like?' Jim, when he had first come up with the story idea for *Dark Crystal*, had seen some of Brian Froud's work and was fascinated by it. He thought that Brian would be the ideal person to help create this world. Froud's drawings have a wonderful unique style and one of the things we needed was a unique vision of what this world was going to be like. Brian is a very creative artist and he is full of ideas, constantly running around sketching things. In a fantasy world, you have to remember, it is not just the characters you are creating. You are creating a world: every piece of furniture, every eating utensil, every wall hanging . . . everything has to be created from scratch. Brian is very good at creating a cohesive world. We have so many symbols in our world and we know what they mean without thought, a red circle with a slash, for instance. An alien coming in and looking at that would not comprehend. In a fantasy world you are creating, you have to relate to the symbols of that world. There are a lot of things in *Dark Crystal* that the audience will not even be aware of, but Brian has created them to give that world an integrated effect. It is one of the most enjoyable aspects of making a fantasy film."

NEW PROJECTS

When asked about his plans for future projects, there were some interesting revelations . . .

KURTZ: My other projects, two of which are animation are based on classic animation background. My interest in animation goes way back to my days as a U.S.C. film student when they had just begun an animation department.

"One of the projects, is an ani-

mated version of Will Eisner's classic comic strip character *The Spirit*, which I've been negotiating for a long time. We've put together a team of artists which I think will do a very good job. Will has been participating all along in the development of the project. Those of you that know *The Spirit*, know that Will is one of the most visual of cartoonists, a wonderful artist. He tells his stories through the visuals more than the dialog. That's what we're after: to try to create an atmosphere of animation that will bring all his characters to life with a wonderful story.

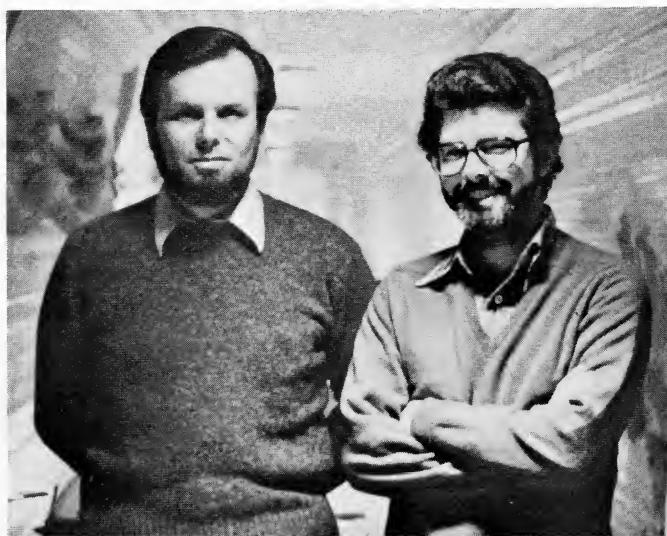
"My other animated project is a co-production, that I'm doing with a Japanese company, which is based on Windsor McKay's Little

strokes, animation should be an alternative media along with everything else. There are a lot of stories that are better told with animation than with live action. I would like to see two or three feature length animated films a year. We don't have that because a lot of people are afraid of animation: it has been pigeonholed into the Disney children's film mold and no other animation seems to have done that well. Some have, down through the years, but a recent revival allows more interesting work to be done with animation. The *Nemo* project is being co-produced by the Japanese because they have very good technique with certain aspects of animation. And there are some areas that they are weak in, that

think there is anything wrong with seeing a *different* story with the same characters if the story is interesting and the audience likes the characters. But to do a film like *Jaws II* or some of the others that have been done . . . you really have no characters, no story to tell, you're just telling the same story over again. I think it's always better to tell a *new* story.

"One project that I am working on in conjunction with the Disney Studios is essentially a sequel, but not really. It's a sequel to the *Wizard of Oz*, a live action film based on the books of L. Frank Baum. It's a fascinating project and I think it could make a very good film. Disney Studios has been sort of paralyzed for thirty years over what to do with the *Oz* books, (which they have owned the rights to that entire period) because of the MGM film. I think they have to ignore the Judy Garland film and accept the fact that a lot of people have read the books, and do another film about Dorothy and her return to Oz.

"Baum wrote fourteen books, all of which are fascinating in some ways. There's no reason why they couldn't be used in film. If everything works out in terms of a story that we all feel comfortable with, we ought to be able to complete *Return to Oz* sometime next year."



Producer Gary Kurtz and George Lucas on the set of *Empire*.

"One thing positive about STAR WARS: it did get young people interested in reading more serious science fiction . . ."

Nemo in Slumberland, a wonderful collection of surrealistic dream adventures drawn over sixty-five years ago. He actually animated a little bit of *Nemo* way back in 1914. He made a small film which is of historical interest because he did several of these small pieces of his own and is actually one of the fathers of modern animation.

"*Nemo* will be a little more difficult to do in some ways than *The Spirit* because there isn't any real story line in the comic strips, but there are a lot of wonderful visual graphics and we have Ray Bradbury doing the screenplay. Bradbury's about half way through and he's come up with very good ideas for an actual plot outline to make the *Nemo* project work."

We asked Mr. Kurtz if the connection with the Japanese studio was a function of economics, with first class animation in America becoming increasingly expensive.

KURTZ: Under ideal circum-

we are very strong in over here. I'm trying to combine the best of both styles and approaches to come up with a film that uses the visual sense and graphic layout sense of the Japanese with the character development of American animators."

ON SEQUELS

Any immensely popular film, such as Star Wars or Raiders of the lost Ark, has an interesting side effect: a flurry of similar movies trying to attract the same audience that attended the original. Another phenomena is the sequel which has developed into a trend in the last few years. When asked about this trend, Mr. Kurtz had some very firm opinions on this subject.

KURTZ: We will probably see some imitations of the popular films released this summer. I think one of the bad signs in filmmaking is the idea of making sequels. I don't

THE AUDIENCE STRIKES BACK

At this point in the interview, editor Mike Stein opened the dialog to questions from the floor. Many hands were raised and questions were directed more to Kurtz's thoughts about moviemaking rather than his current involvements.

Q: Are you ever apprehensive about a new project, knowing so much time and money is involved?

KURTZ: Yes, of course. You always are. You have to have a certain amount of faith in what you want to make, but you are always guessing a bit at the audience, at what they would like. So you have to start with what you would like to see and hope there will be an audience for that. And it's extremely gratifying when a large audience likes your work, but even if it's a small audience, it's still satisfying.

"For example, I made a film before *American Graffiti* with Monty Helmut directing, that I liked very much. I thought it was a wonderful little film. It never really found an audience, though. It runs on the midnight cult circuit and there are people out there who really love it. It's called *Two Lane Blacktop* with James Taylor and although it never made money, it's one of my favorite films. I think you still have to use that criteria when you start, that assuming others will also enjoy something that you would like to see. It happens to everyone, writers artists . . . you create something that no one else likes. You just have to shrug it off. It doesn't mean that work isn't any

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GARY KURTZ

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good, it just means there isn't an audience for that particular work. You just start on something else and use your own best judgement at the time. Because someone doesn't like what you've done, it doesn't invalidate the work."

Q: How do you organise yourself for a particular project?

KURTZ: On a science fiction project there are a lot of disparate elements working in a lot of different places. I think an effective way to coordinate that is through storyboards. An artist develops the storyboards and they serve as a guide for all the special effects work. You have sort of a "master control" room and you have everything up on one wall and you refer to it to make sure what's being worked on. It's really an excercise in logistics control similar to a large scale military operation. In fact, the making of most films has been related to a military type of logistics. And that's true to a certain extent, but it's no more difficult than keeping your room clean when you're growing up . . . It's just a lot more expensive and there's a lot more people involved."

Q: Do you think that the popularity of the *Star Wars* films inspired more people to read science fiction?

KURTZ: Yes, I think that's true. I think what happened was that when *Star Wars* came out, there

were already a lot of science fiction fans that said: 'Well, it's fun but it's just a space opera. Why don't you make more serious science fiction?' I think that's a valid criticism but *SW* wasn't intended to be the definitive science fiction or fantasy work. I think that one thing positive about *Star Wars* is that it did get a lot of young people interested in reading the more serious science fiction. Book sales did go up and I think *Star Wars* helped. Possibly it will cause a new generation to become more interested in serious science fiction and allow us to make more serious films. Anything that generates more interest in the genre is helpful."

After this last question, the interview was concluded because it had already run long and the room was required for the next presentation. Kurtz was warmly applauded by all present for what had been an enjoyable and informative hour. That hour had also been revealing of a man who is essentially a dream maker. He has earned an enviable position in filmmaking: because he has a track record of judgements that make money for studios, he now has the freedom to pursue more personal visions in cinema. Because the quality of those visions have exceeded all expectations in the past, we can look forward to continued excellence in the future.



Muppeteer
JIM HENSON
And Star Wars
Producer
GARY KURTZ
Talk About Their
Newest Project:
DARK CRYSTAL

Photos by Jessie Horsting



Interview by MICHAEL STEIN and JESSIE HORSTING

THE DARK CRYSTAL

FF: How did you decide to branch off from the light comedy of the Muppet movies into a more serious science fiction/fantasy format such as in *Dark Crystal*?

HENSON: It was a very different thing, certainly. A major change of direction for us, my company, the designers and all concerned. But it was fun. *Dark Crystal* was a story we'd started working on even before the first *Muppet* movie, back in '75 or '76. So it has been in development for a long time.

FF: Did you have trouble finding a producer or funding for such a different kind of picture?

HENSON: No, not really. It was relatively easy. When Lew Grade approached us to do the first *Muppet* movie, I said, "Yes, that's a really good idea, but I've already got this movie I've started thinking about." He said, "Fine, we'll do them both." Then he said, "But let's do the *Muppet* movie first." So we did that one, then I kept working on *Dark Crystal* all this time. There was just a small team working on it at that time, mostly puppet designers. It was the sort of thing

Photos: Opposite page an evil Skeksis holds Kira as a hostage. Above, top left and right, Jim Henson and Gary Kurtz are interviewed by *Fantastic Films* at the 40th Annual World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago. Center, Jen and Kira are the last of the Gelfling race.



that needed a lot of research, a lot of time and experimentation.

Then, at the end of the first *Muppet* movie, the thought was that we should follow that up with another. The theatre owners wanted us to come through with a sequel that next summer again, and that pushed *Dark Crystal* back a bit. But we were working on *Dark Crystal* all that time and Lew Grade kept supporting us, something that I really appreciated.

FF: Were you a fan of Brian Froud (the British fantasy artist who designed most of the movie) before he started working on *Dark Crystal*?

HENSON: About the time I started working on the film, someone showed me some of Brian's work. I loved it. I think that was about the time one of his first books was published, I think. It was a book of fantasy illustrations called *Once Upon A Time*. He had three or four illustrations in that book and that was the first I'd ever seen of him. I was working on the film anyway so I asked for a meeting. We had dinner and have been working enthusiastically ever since, about five years, now. He's a lovely guy, he's brought so much to this film. He worked on all the design concepts and even more than that. A lot of

the main look and feel of things.

He contributed a lot in the discussions about the characters, what they're like inside. He developed a whole symbolic structure that permeates the "reality" of *Dark Crystal*.

KURTZ: When you're creating a fantasy world, one of the biggest challenges is to make it exist beyond the edge of the frame, so to speak . . . that there is a "real world" out there and that things are happening consciously or unconsciously outside of that particular scene. Brian was very good at developing the visual symbology of the *Dark Crystal* society, and the

religious and philosophical concepts that went with it, even though that's not the central theme of the film. They're just sort of there, at the edges.

FF: Gary, how did you team up with the Henson group? What got you interested in *Dark Crystal*?

KURTZ: Well, I first got interested when I went to Jim to have him develop a creature for *The Empire Strikes Back*, which ended up becoming Yoda. I asked his assistance after seeing some of the things he'd developed for *Dark Crystal* which were along the same lines. Something that looked "real" in the fantasy sense. Inevitably, a



lot of his workshop people helped on Yoda, while continuing to work on *Dark Crystal*. Then he asked me to join him in working on the film. And eventually, I got involved full time when they were beginning to shoot.

FF: What kind of marketing approach are you planning? For example, in the area of the poster designs.

KURTZ: Brian Froud is working on one poster design right now.

FF: The creatures in *Dark Crystal*, are they considered Muppets or puppets?

HENSON: We just call them creatures; they are not really either

muppets or puppets.

FF: They seem incredibly more complex than the muppets. Some of them must have one or two actors inside of them. It also seems that they incorporated variations of oriental types of dance movements. Did you study any choreography related to those styles?

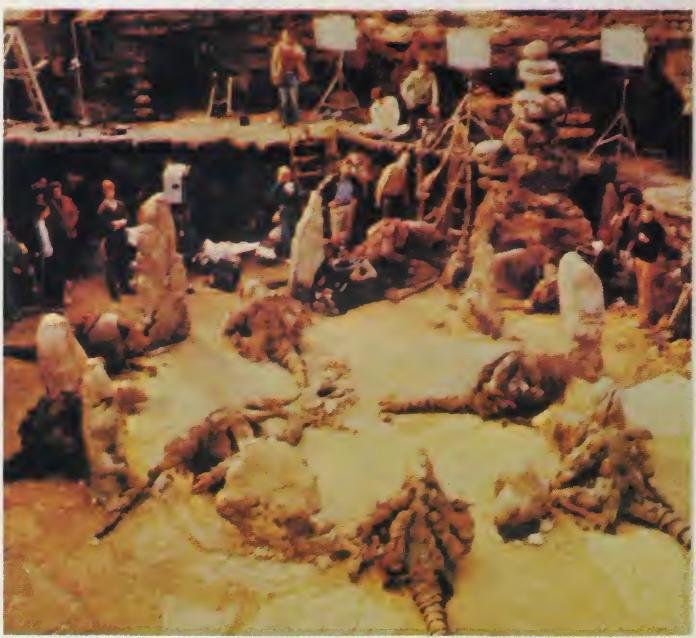
HENSON: There are similarities there. We brought in a Swiss performer who works as a mime. He was in charge of "choreographing" movement for certain of the characters, and had a team of performers that worked for about six to eight months before we even started shooting, practicing the

ways these characters would move and also building up the physical stamina necessary to perform the movements, such as the galloping landstriders.

Also remember that these creatures are fairly complicated. The technology used for them is a variety of techniques: radio control, mechanical linkages and some of the traditional puppetry techniques. But it's all mixed together so that it's very difficult to identify exactly. Because of that complexity and because there's five or six performers for each creature, sometimes that team of people were the performer. They had to

work out the personality of each creature. They had to rehearse as a team so that they could keep that personality consistent. Sometimes when we had virtually every character on the stage at the same time there would be fifty or sixty operators on the set trying to function, and it was like Grand Central Station. To keep them all working on film was difficult, but it was always the principal performers job to focus the personality of the character and to be the actor and make sure that the character came across correctly on the screen.

FF: The heroes, Jen and Kira, as opposed to Yoda or E.T. were de-



signed to be "cute." Does this kind of cliched appearance ever get in the way of serious story telling?

KURTZ: I think what you're reacting to is the fact that the central characters, Jen and Kira are certainly the most human looking, sort of elvish. And because of that, the audience expects them to act more like human beings, whereas the other characters are so bizarre and different, they don't expect them to act like human beings. The biggest problem with a story like this is that the hero always seems to be the most *bland* character in the whole thing. He's everyman, he's you, he's the audience, and what he comes up against, all of the problems he encounters are what is supposed to make the storyline interesting. But I'm not sure that's always the case. In fact, I think most people, if you ask them who their favorite character from *Star Wars* was, almost no one will say Luke Skywalker. They will inevitably choose Han Solo or Chewbacca, or C-3PO or Darth Vader or somebody else. Because the main protagonist is the center of the story and the audience's stand in, he carries the film, but nobody really sees him as an important or major character. Very often the "hero" is not the favorite. It's not because we admire the bad guys or the supporting characters more than the hero, it's just that they're more interesting.

Henson: In *Dark Crystal* I was performing the part of Jen, who is that sort of bland character, but you need that sort of a character. Consequently, Jen and Kira, the gelflings, were the most life-like characters in the film, which I found, as a performer, was one of the hardest things to do. I've never done any performing that difficult in my life. And the things that were hardest were really ordinary things like making the characters stand up, or walk, or kneel down, the little things that real people do so easily. The Muppets can just go bouncing across the room . . . that's all fine, but when you have some characters that you have to believe in, as living creatures the movements are much more complex and subtle. Like do you cut your eyes before you turn your head or after, little things like that, things you normally wouldn't think about. Oh, the number of takes used in this film . . . (chuckles)

FF: Did you find yourself becoming more conscious about the details of your own human movements?

Henson: No, not really.

KURTZ: However, in making all of the creatures work, most of the performers used their own perceptions of life as one of their only touchstones with reality. With all the odd characters in the film, which don't really act like human beings at all, the underlying personalities that are there are certainly human insofar as we know why they do what they do or why

they think what they think. The reason artificial creatures work so well is that the personality that's created for them is something that we can perceive as seeing in other people, sort of an ideal distortion. It's like the cartoon caricatures that artists do at carnivals and fairs because they exaggerate something about the person. That's what happens with artificial creatures. That's what happened with Yoda, and that's what happened with some of the creatures in *Dark Crystal*. We spot those points that we see as realistic in ourselves or in other people even though they're not portrayed in the same way.

FF: Do either of you plan to work together again?

Henson: You can't anticipate a character like Miss Piggy. That sort of thing just happens.

FF: Did you find it easier or more difficult writing about "unreal" things, things that are sprung from your imagination?

Henson: Well, it was certainly more fun. I think the idea of conceiving of and building the *Dark Crystal* world from scratch was really appealing. A lot of our early work, as we started putting this thing together was really collaborative. We'd sit around the room and talk, spending two or three days on what these characters should be like and invent each of the areas of this new world. It was really a lot of fun.

FF: Is there anything more you'd

pushes some of the newer material out of the way. That's what I think is unfortunate.

Henson: That's why it's such an easy decision to make. On Broadway there's nothing really new, only revivals of old shows because of the "safety factor."

KURTZ: For example, the play *Cats* was originally offered to Broadway and they said, "No, that's a terrible concept." Eventually it opened in London and made lots of money, and only then did Broadway want it. The same thing happened to some extent with *Evita*. It's just like the original concept for *Star Wars*. A lot of people turned it down, some because they didn't like science fiction, which, I guess, is a reasonable excuse. If you read something and you don't like it because you don't like the genre, that's ok. But some people turned *Star Wars* down because 'science fiction isn't selling right now', which is trying to second guess the audience. That's not intelligent. I think you have to push those boundaries a little and hope. We believed in the project, but it was Fox who ultimately stuck their necks out and backed us, quite frankly on the basis that we'd done one successful film, *American Graffiti*. If we had not made *American Graffiti* and if it had not been successful, there would have been no chance for anyone to make *Star Wars*.

FF: You seem to be delving back into history for your next projects. Are you trying to educate the public to some extent?

KURTZ: No, it's nothing as serious as that. I think that both of these are timeless. Both *Little Nemo* and *The Spirit* are excellent vehicles for animation. I've always been a fan of animation and it just happened that negotiations for the rights on both of them came together at the same time.

I've always loved the *Oz* books myself, and Disney has owned them for thirty odd years, but they didn't know what to do with them because of the overpowering images of the MGM film. In a sense, you sort of have to set that aside. It doesn't demean it in any way, but you have to go back to the books and do the books as they were originally written. *The Wizard of Oz* as portrayed on stage and in film was more like a vaudeville show, a very bright and wonderful way, but the film is not a direct sequel to that. You couldn't do a direct sequel to that. Even if you could somehow magically bring Judy Garland back at the age she was as Dorothy, I'm still not sure that would be enough to rekindle the popularity. You have to go directly back to the books. Maybe some of the younger people don't know the books that well, but I know I'd like to see those characters again in another story. And that's the only reason I do movies, because I want to see it, and think there's enough of an audience out there to make it worthwhile.



Kira with Jen.

Henson: No, not at the moment. I've got another Muppet film ready and Gary's got a couple of other projects, so the next couple of things we do probably won't be together.

KURTZ: I've got a couple of new projects after this, two animated films that are just starting to develop. One is based on Will Eisner's character *The Spirit*; the other is based on *Little Nemo*, a famous Sunday comic strip that was done by Windsor McKay. I'm also working with Walt Disney in the very early stages of a sequel to *The Wizard of Oz*. There isn't much on that yet, but it looks right now as if Dorothy's returned and the sequel will be based on composite parts of the second, third and fourth books.

FF: Is there anything else, any other sort of movie besides the Muppets, you'd like to do, Jim?

Henson: I've got a couple of scripts I've written that are sitting around. I'll probably get to them as soon as I can. I also have a new television series we're doing for HBO with all new characters, that comes on at the end of this year. It's a children's show called *Fraggle Rock*. It's designed for international distribution through the CBC.

FF: Do you anticipate a character like Miss Piggy in that one?

like to do with the *Dark Crystal* world? A sequel perhaps?

Henson: Well, that's really hard to know and if we decide to follow this one with a second, we'll play with it and see how it feels. It's not the sort of film that has a logical sequel. It doesn't immediately lead to another film.

FF: Gary, in an earlier interview you said that this year's "sequel trend" was unfortunate. Is there anything you would like to do that's new and original in the field of science fiction/fantasy?

KURTZ: When I said that I meant that I personally don't mind seeing a group of characters again that I enjoyed seeing the first time. I think one of the reasons we seem to enjoy the *Star Wars* films is because of the characters. It's the same with the James Bond films, or any other series of films. It doesn't have to be a direct sequel, just another story using the same characters, which will make a fine film. What bothers me is films like *Jaws 2*, which are the same film all over again, just with different people. You just do the same story, change a little, gussy it up and it's an easy decision to make. If we do this and it makes half of the original profits, we're okay. There are so many sequels this year that it